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Service and Moments of Truth

Service and the Moment of Truth

Service as a social and psychological phenomenon between two or more people is related to the concept of the *moment of truth*, which Richard Normann suggests is critical for the successful provision of service.[1] A metaphor of bullfighting is often used to illustrate the meeting between the provider of a service and the customer. While hopefully service encounters are less confrontational than a bullfight, the sense of engagement (particularly in a symbiotic relationship of mutual dependency) is aptly conveyed. Perceived service quality is realized at this moment of truth. The outcome of this moment depends upon the skill, motivation, and situational creativity of the individual service provider with the customer contributing to the service outcome. A service encounter tends to be outside the control and influence of the service provider's manager or immediate supervisor. In this perspective, it is also difficult and many times even impossible to preprogram the service.

Service as Serial Moments of Truth

The term *moment of truth* refers to encounters between customers and service providers. The moment of truth is that instant when consumers experience and judge service quality—in modern-day parlance, "when the rubber meets the road." This instant (or rather series of instances) often decides service success or failure. Richard Normann writes that the concept of the moment of truth is from bullfighting, where the phrase "*el momento de verdad*" refers to the climax of the spectacle when the matador kills the bull. Since its introduction, many commentators have used the concept of the moment of truth as a metaphor to describe encounters between customers and service providers.[2]

For an organization providing service, the number of moments of truth can run into millions. Jan Carlzon, then chief operating officer at Scandinavian Airlines System (SAS), estimated that in one year of business there are

"50 million moments of truth," and fifteen seconds decide whether the organization succeeds in its service delivery on this particular occasion.[3] Another company identified "152,000 moments of truth each day" or "four customer contacts per second in a typical ten-hour day."[4] It is estimated that, at the very least, a large company in the service sector experiences "tens of thousands of moments of truth a day," and that each of these instances reveals the quality of the service.[5] At each of these moments the service is laid bare and its quality exposed for scrutiny. The consumer has an opportunity to compare the service against expectations and evaluate quality against prior experience with this or a competing service provider. For the customer, these impressions of service are said to be "indelible."[6] Furthermore, the customer may recall other instances of similar service provision (including experiences of competitor's service delivery) and use these experiences to provide a benchmark for purposes of comparison.

Moments of Truth in Practice: Scandinavian Airlines System (SAS)

Arguably, the first international company to integrate concepts of service management and the moment of truth into its business development was Scandinavian Airlines System (SAS). SAS is a multinational consortium jointly owned by the governments of Denmark, Norway, and Sweden.[7] In 1981, when the airline was losing revenues and faced increased competition for passengers on its routes, the airline appointed a new president and chief executive officer (CEO). The new appointee was Jan Carlzon, formerly president of Linjeflyg, the Swedish national airline. As parts of his turnaround strategy and management philosophy, Carlzon decided that he should focus on communicating his vision and that the airline should focus on its people. Carlzon realized that of the tasks that he and his executives needed to address, a key task would be to develop the SAS human resources (HR) competences. A major challenge within this overall task would be redefining and then inculcating service excellence throughout the whole organization. Jan Carlzon (1941–) became an internationally renowned management guru. Carlzon's book *Moments of Truth* became an international best seller and a must-read book in business and management courses.

The importance of moments of truth gives managers special challenges in a service organization. In particular, the social and psychological characteristics of the moment of truth concept can be particularly challenging. If the service provision is to be successful and effective, an organization's management demands a different type of managerial mind-set. It is not sufficient for an organization to relegate service provision as a responsibility of solely frontline

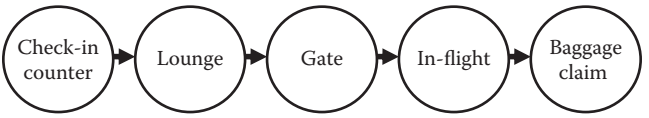

FIGURE 2.1
The travel experience as a service process. (From Fredrik Ekdahl, Anders Gustafsson, and Bo Edvardsson (1999), Customer-Oriented Service Development at SAS, *Managing Service Quality*, 9(6), 405.)

(customer-facing) employees. One of Jan Calzon's executive decisions was to designate all employees to a marketing function; he made the statement: "If you're not working for the customer, you'd better be working for someone who is." This not only conveyed a clear message to employees (such as baggage handlers and maintenance crews) who had never even considered that they were service providers, but publicized throughout the airline's business functions that everyone's work tasks incorporated service delivery.

Figure 2.1 shows a sequence of stages in an airline passenger's journey. Developed by Fredrik Ekdahl and his colleagues for SAS, this is a simplistic model. A walk-through of any airport reveals a multitude of distraction points for passengers (one way that operators of airport terminals generate revenues and profits). Current-day air travel tends to be fragmented with rules, regulations, and procedures hidden from passengers who feel overwhelmed by an invisible, uncaring system.[8]

Figure 2.1 shows the key points at which a passenger interacts with the airline's employees in service encounters during their travel on a particular flight. These key points contain the moments of truth. At each of the five stages in the flight the passenger encounters different SAS employees. For the passenger the perceived quality of service (the delivered value and benefits) is a combination of these moments of truth provided by the different employees to form a connected whole travel experience. For myriad reasons the customer's perceived service quality may be magnificent or deficient, more likely in between these two extremes.

Prior to the arrival of Jan Carlzon, one of the weak points in SAS operations was check-in. Check-in staff regarded their main role as issuing a boarding pass to each passenger booked on a flight. An initial meet-and-greet ("feel good") function was not seen as important as the flight (the physical transportation of passengers from embarkation point to destination). If passengers were to become loyal customers, this clearly had to change. In his strategy to increase passenger revenues, Jan Carlzon introduced business class into the airline's operations. This proposal met with initial resistance from senior management and the airline's union representatives. The rationales were sociocultural: Sweden prides itself on its social equality and frowns upon any hint of social hierarchy or superiority. In terms of a passenger's travel experience, the next stage is the airport lounge. Nowadays, most airlines see a lounge service as a relatively straightforward way to differentiate their service from

competitors. Executive lounges have therefore evolved into a somewhat standard service and tend to be publicized by the airlines as a comfort zone where business class and other privileged passengers can enjoy a stress-free environment replete with snacks and drinks free of charge (naturally included in the higher price of the ticket or as part of frequent flier membership).

From the model in Figure 2.1 it is evident that the lounge is the second stage for passengers to interact with SAS employees. Under Jan Carlzon's leadership, the lounges were not only somewhere that passengers interacted with SAS employees, but also where they could access an interactive information system that provided individual passengers with details of their flight, such as ticketing, seating, and other information. A newly introduced SAS kiosk provided this kind of information. Passengers gained access to their data by becoming members of the SAS EuroBonus club (an early example of a frequent flier loyalty scheme). A personalized PIN number used to access the personal flight data ensured passenger confidentiality. SAS kiosks thus gave benefits to both passengers and SAS employees. Passengers who joined the EuroBonus system tended to be people used to being in control of their professional lives and well used to making personal and business-related decisions. The SAS kiosk put such people back in control of their data. In general, as safety concerns are a priority, airports and airlines tend to be rule governed and have become more so after September 11, 2001. For SAS employees, who passengers saw as being able to answer any and all questions about their flight regardless of their job function, the SAS kiosk saved valuable time. The gate, the point of embarkation onto the airplane, is the last occasion that passengers encounter ground-based personnel. At this stage in their travel passengers are obliged to make one of many procedural activities involved in air travel. Procedural activities such as passport checks, airline check-in, and luggage inspections are regulatory and standardized processes that allow and facilitate safe air travel. At the gate the procedural activity involves "exchanging value": surrendering part of the boarding pass in exchange for permission to board the aircraft.[9]

During the flight, moments of truth are many and varied and the airline employees responsible are cabin crew, not ground crew, that the passenger has encountered up until now. On the aircraft, most moments of truth involve human providers of service (such as cabin crew helping stow luggage, demonstrating safety features, and serving meals). If any moments of truth can be said to be up close and personal, it is service provided in the close confines of an aircraft cabin with many passengers requiring service. There are valid reasons why onboard aircraft service tends to be highly structured. First, cabin crew check boarding passes, show passengers to seats and stow luggage, give the safety demonstration, distribute newspapers, hot towels, and cold drinks, and prepare for takeoff. Sequencing, timing, duration, and frequency of services allow cabin crew to maintain control. In this way a series of service activities occupies passengers' attention. A flight is punctuated with technology-enabled service announcements

(especially ones involving safety): "please return to your seats," "the seat-belt sign is on," "we'll be experiencing some turbulence." These ensure that passengers are reminded that safety is a concern and that the crew are managing this important aspect of the flight.[10] Emergency announcements are understated: on a recent flight from Bangkok to Hong Kong taken by one of the current authors (BH), an announcement of faulty wiring warranting a return to Bangkok (the point of no return not yet reached) turned out to be an electrical fire. Safely landed at Bangkok some twenty minutes after departure, the large number of fire engines surrounding the aircraft demonstrated that neither the airline nor the terminal operators were taking chances with passenger safety either in the air or on the ground.

Implications of Managing Moments of Truth

In combination, moments of truth reveal features of the organization and its ability to provide service to the customer. Individual moments of truth contribute to the whole perception of an organization's service quality. And an amalgam of individual instances contributes to the perceptions from the market (i.e., customers) toward the organization. It is therefore critical that a service organization successfully manages its frontline service encounters. In the short term customer satisfaction is at stake. In the longer term, the perceived reputation of the organization is at stake. Continued success (or otherwise) of the service encounters will likely determine the survival of the organization.

Scandinavian Airlines Systems (SAS) during the era of Jan Carlzon's presidency (1981–1993) was, as far as we are aware, the first international company to integrate on a large scale the concepts of moments of truth as key foundations of its business growth and strategic development through service management. Under Carlzon's leadership SAS regarded its employees as crucial to business success. Famously, he redefined the business tasks of all employees so that "the entire company—from the executive suite to the most remote check-in terminal—was focused on service."[11] Jan Carlzon was invited to be SAS president when the airline was in a crisis. In the previous two years the airline had posted losses of US$30 million and was rated near the bottom of the European airlines for its lack of punctuality. Within a year of Carlzon's arrival, SAS had returned to profit. By 1984 SAS was voted Air Transport World's "Airline of the Year."[12] During his first years as president, Carlzon initiated 147 projects to improve customer service. With a strategic focus and business emphasis on service, an integral part of the airline's strategic development became development of human resources (HR). In this context HR incorporated development of skills and competences to transform SAS into a service-oriented airline. Three hundred sixty degree evaluations became

a yearly process throughout the entire group of companies. In the process Jan Carlzon became a world-renowned management guru (*Moments of Truth* became a best seller). In his introduction to the book, Tom Peters writes: "Carlzon charged the frontline people with 'providing the service they had wanted to provide all along.'"[13]

Daily Moments of Truth

In our everyday lives, we experience countless moments of truth that many of us take for granted. In all likelihood, our subconscious mind will register and remember both the pleasant and unpleasant encounters that we experience with service providers. If we travel as part of our work or leisure routine, we are regularly likely to experience travel and hotel bookings, timetabling, check-in, room service, and checkout. If we are unlucky, we might also experience delayed services, inaccurate bookings, long lines, and mismatched orders. Each encounter may be with a different employee. And, in the case of booking services, the "employee" may be a computer. We experience the different features of restaurant service, such as booking, waiting for a table, the location we are given in the restaurant, face-to-face conversations with the manager and the waiter, the efficiency with which our order is taken, and the speed with which our order is processed and delivered to our table. Also on a day-to-day basis, we experience the services of our mobile phone service provider. The physical instrument for making calls is a minor part of the service and is manufactured by a different organization from that providing the ongoing service. The number of times that we make a phone call is part of the number of moments of truth for the service provider.

If we fall ill, we encounter medical professionals such as nurses, paramedics, physicians, or medical specialists. We might also experience various locations for the delivery of medical services, such as an ambulance, a clinic, or a hospital. Again, each encounter provides a moment of truth between the service provider and the user. In emergencies, speed of service arrival is part of the moment of truth. In medical and similar services, encounters are likely to be laden with emotions such as anxiety, stress, concern, and pain, not only for the service user but also for nearby witnesses, friends, and family members. In such circumstances, managing the moment of truth becomes especially critical. Service in such environments is called emotional labor and requires service providers of a special character and commitment to the customer.[14] Key skills required are the ability to suppress feelings and emotions and maintain a dispassionate demeanor. In this way, the customer and any nearby people do not misinterpret the situation as one requiring panic. Members of the nursing profession, caregivers, and emergency service personnel are rightly renowned for their ability to manage their emotional labor environments.

Treatments such as those offered by a spa or wellness center have their own specialized moment of truth. Such services, situated somewhere between healthcare and the beauty industry, can often relate to a customer's self-esteem by offering a feel-good experience. Even so, trust and emotions may be at a high level, especially in the field of cosmetic surgery, where the service involves a service provider altering a customer's physical features. If the vast majority of moments of truth have fleeting or transient consequences, then those in this area of service may have lasting consequences. And these may be favorable or unfavorable. Cosmetic surgery that enhances the natural contours of the face or body is likely to be regarded by the service user as successful. When cosmetic surgery goes awry, the user is disappointed. If the damage is permanent, the disappointment is worse. This emotion is aggravated when the physician's errors or incompetence is on public view. With a hairdressing failure in cutting, styling, and (especially) dyeing the damage will be rectified as the hair grows. With a cosmetic surgery to the face, this is less possible. Similarly, disappointment with dental work (especially if this involves a tooth extraction) is likely to be more long lasting.

There are myriad travelers' tales of moments of truth at airports. In the golden age of air travel this was the domain of the rich and famous. Lower costs and technological developments brought air travel within reach of a wider range of travelers. As the peripheral services of air travel have become industrialized and mass produced rather than individual, the moment of truth has become less easily manageable for airlines (especially so-called budget airlines). Check-in, baggage handling, in-flight services, and arrivals all bring service encounters to the forefront of a traveler's awareness. Customers' awareness becomes exacerbated as airport procedures and boarding regulations become more stringent and intrusive.[15] For an airline, the industrialization of the flying experience brings special challenges for training, management, and service practices. Where an organization (such as an airline) uses outsourced suppliers to provide customer services, managing these services presents further challenges. In the domain of shopping and retailing, there are moments of truth at each stage of the transaction. From the welcome into the store to the acceptance (or otherwise) of the credit or debit card and the purchase transaction, the service provider has to handle moments of truth. Some of the direct providers of the service will be face-to-face with the customer. Others, such as the financial services provider, will be off-site. However, each provider of service is an integral component of the shopping experience. The success with which the services are provided contributes to that experience. When the service is a pure service encounter, the customer takes away an experience. Where the service is combined with a product, part of the moment of truth will happen when the customer begins using the product. For service providers who deliver pure service, moments of truth tend to happen in real time. Any errors can be adjusted and amended while the customer is engaging in the service encounter. For providers of service that incorporates a product, there is a

delayed moment of truth. Away from the location of the service provision the customer is less able to ask the service provider in person to redress any shortcomings.

Governments too have to manage moments of truth in the provision of public services. And, increasingly, these are provided at a distance or electronically. The emergency services (police, fire, ambulance) are one area where it is critical to be successful in service provision. Increasingly, governments are employing electronic aspects of service such as e-government, e-revenue, and online services for education, employment and training, voting, and opinion seeking. The nature of a technological intermediary between the service provider and the customer makes the service encounter less easily managed.

Moments of Truth, the Customer and the Employee

For the customer, moments of truth carry high stakes as customers "invest a high amount of emotional energy in the outcome."[16] As a corollary, the high emotion invested by customers demands an equivalent high performance by the service provider. The moment of truth concept is helpful in defining roles in services delivery and in delineating a framework of services delivery. However, extending the metaphor allows us to note the wider parameters of service delivery, such as the need for training employees to manage impromptu encounters with consumers. As in the bullfighting metaphor, small changes in the service encounter have a great effect. One twist of the bull's head skewers the matador on the horns. Similarly, a customer can alter the potential service quality, perhaps by making unexpected or unacceptable demands for which the service provider is unprepared. There is also a need to educate senior managers (who may not necessarily meet customers on a regular basis). Internalizing service applies to all employees, not solely those whose daily work routines involve direct contact with customers.

Concepts of the moment of truth similar to those that apply within an organization and its relationship to its employees also apply to external relationships of employees with an organization's customers. In this context, the moments of truth for employees are those moments in the workday "when employees directly experience what the company represents."[17] During an employee's working life with an organization there will be many moments of truth. And, as an employee progresses through an organization's career path, that person will build up a mental model of the organization's collective resource capability (human, physical, or other assets). As the organization's "insiders," employees are best placed to gauge the sincerity of statements made to customers about a range of issues, such as quality, timeliness, commitment, and efficiency.

Recognizing Moments of Truth in Service Delivery

In service delivery, moments of truth are as brief as they are in the bullfighting arena. And as a continuum, moments of truth tend to be elongated as part of the process of the service encounter from beginning to conclusion. Moments of truth can be identified throughout the process. It is suggested that for each consumer, two moments of truth are important. The first gains the consumer's attention, and the second provides the experience of the service benefits.[18] Figure 2.2 shows the progression of the service encounter with two moments of truth.

The first moment of truth takes the customer up to the buying decision (i.e., whether or not to proceed with the service encounter). This decision taken, the second moment of truth focuses on the constituent components of the service (including the customer's perceived value and benefits from pursuing the service encounter to its conclusion). In this model the customer is involved at two stages in the process. Within the first moment of truth, up to the buying decision, the customer encounters the "silent salesman." This may be from word of mouth (WOM) from friends or acquaintances, observed advertising, seeing the service in use by others, or point-of-sale publicity. Once the customer makes a buying decision (to buy or not to buy, that is the question), the second moment of truth involves the service provider. This may be an employee of the service-providing organization or a technology (automated machine or online service). In the case of self-service, this second moment of truth depends on the ease of service and payment. For the service-providing organization, managing moments of truth can offer an audit of service quality. In a model called five steps to service

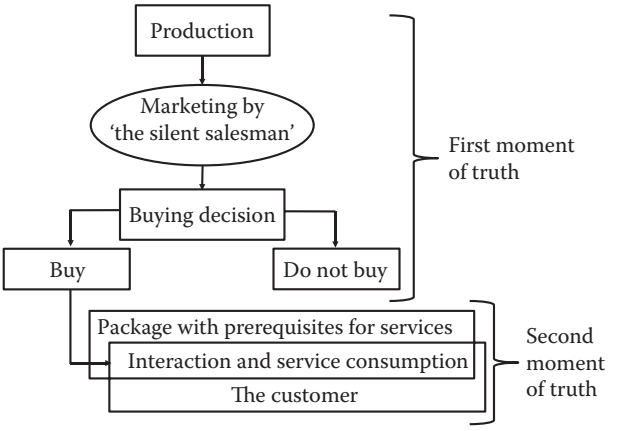

FIGURE 2.2
The first and second moments of truth. (From Martin Löfgren (2005), Winning at the First and Second Moments of Truth: An Exploratory Study, *Managing Service Quality*, 15(1), 109.)

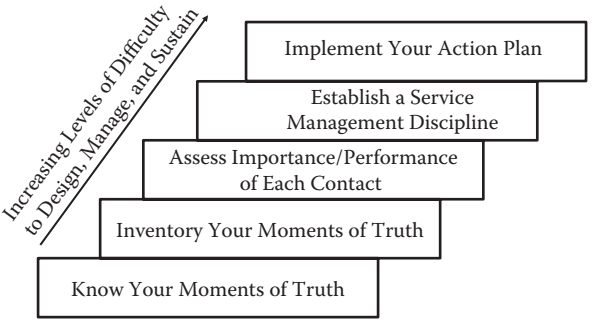

FIGURE 2.3
Five steps to service excellence. (Adapted from Craig Cina (1991), Five Steps to Service Excellence, Building Service Relationships: It's All about Promises, *Journal of Services Marketing*, 2(4), 40.)

excellence, Craig Cina proposes a structured and systematic process of management actions that focus on moments of truth.[19] Figure 2.3 shows the steps in this process. We have adapted the original figure to aid our explanation and discussion.

The bottom of the five steps relates to an organization's awareness of its moments of truth. Organizations should understand that this stage is not wholly straightforward, nor can the exercise be completed quickly. Earlier investigations and analysis emphasize that the task is time-consuming, benefits from a sensitive analysis (including videotaped evidence), and is heavy on human resource effort.[20] Although there may be general patterns, moments of truth are likely to vary from industry to industry. For an organization, knowing moments of truth is the first stage that develops into an inventory of the moments of truth.

Again, care needs to be taken to capture the customer's view of the service encounter. The next step is critical, as it demands assessing the importance of each moment of truth in the service encounter. This is a conjoined assessment of the importance of the moment of truth from the perspective of the service-providing organization and the customer. It is likely that moments of truth gain in importance as the service encounter progresses. The first customer contact with a service employee is an important touch point (Jan Carlzon writes that customer contact with frontline employees lasts an average of fifteen seconds each time). Contacts may be lengthier and more critical as the service encounter develops, takes shape, and seems to have the potential to deliver customer benefit and value. For executives and managers, establishing a service management discipline involves much effort. And, as we show in Figure 2.4, there are increasing levels of difficulty as the organization moves up its process from bottom to top. Implementation, the uppermost step, is predictably the most difficult for executives and managers to achieve success. It therefore makes sense that while each of the five

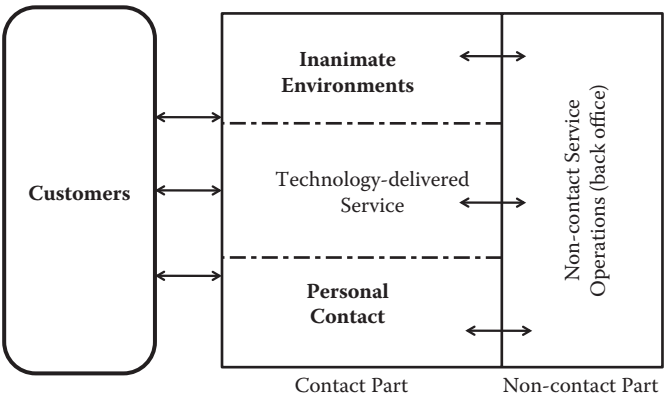

FIGURE 2.4
Technology-delivered service. (Adapted from Mitchell M. Tseng, Ma Qinhai, and Chuan-Jun Su (1999), Mapping Customers' Service Experience for Operations Improvement, *Business Process Management*, 5(1), 51.)

steps is important in alerting an organization's executives, managers, and employees to the moments of truth in their service processes and delivery, at the uppermost steps increased levels of resources need to be mobilized and employed. Not all executives or organizations achieve this uppermost level.

Moments of truth also have relevance in an automated version of service provision. While the majority of moments of truth continue to be face-to-face encounters, encounters facilitated by technology can bypass personal engagement. This feature is shown in Figure 2.4.

The figure shows that by using technology for the required service, the customer bypasses the personal contact and the inanimate environments that surround service delivery. Technology enables the customer to "communicate" directly with the service provider's noncontact service operations (back office). The figure illustrates why using technology to provide service potentially enables organizations to realize economies of scale and reduce operating costs. It is alleged that providing a face-to-face counter service transaction costs a bank around $10; the same transaction machine delivered by an ATM costs the bank around $1, and an online bank transaction costs around 10 cents. Through the use of technology the employee providing face-to-face service is "disintermediated" and is no longer needed to provide service. As the customer can now initiate the service contact, the service encounter becomes more difficult for the organization to manage. The customer can now terminate the service encounter by clicking a computer mouse if, for example, the service is not what is expected. People we have interviewed say they have lost count of the number of times they have clicked to move away from a website in mid-transaction because the booking site was cumbersome to operate. Booking sites for airlines and hotels seem in some cases to be especially user-*un*friendly. When organizations set up a

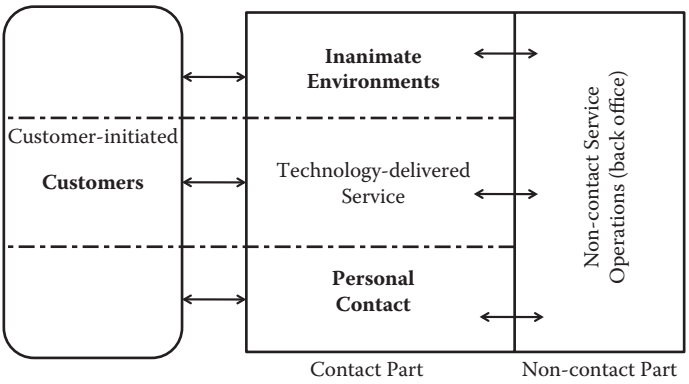

FIGURE 2.5
Service when customers use technology. (Adapted from Mitchell M. Tseng, Ma Qinhai, and Chuan-Jun Su (1999), Mapping Customers' Service Experience for Operations Improvement, *Business Process Management*, 5(1), 51.)

website presence to interface with their customers, this is an opportunity to check and assess whether the quality of their technology-delivered service is acceptable to technology-savvy customers, who may have different quality standards than the organization's usual customer base.

The key message here is: when technology substitutes for a human service provider, the moment of truth needs careful forethought and ongoing management. At the moment of truth the customer has to relate to a technological interlocutor (in essence a machine) instead of meeting a human service provider. This removes the skills of a human interlocutor, who infuses emotion into the service encounter. A human interlocutor can also react to another human as part of the service encounter, including helping to identify and overcome errors and misunderstandings. The moment of truth will fall flat if the customer finds the technology interface difficult to understand, difficult to use, or perceives the technology as unfriendly. A key concept in the design of a technology interface to people is usability.[21]

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8. See discussion in Fredrik Ekdahl, Anders Gustafsson, and Bo Edvardsson (1999), Customer-Oriented Service Development at SAS, *Managing Service Quality*, 9(6), 403–410.
9. See discussion in Fredrik Ekdahl, Anders Gustafsson, and Bo Edvardsson (1999), Customer-Oriented Service Development at SAS, *Managing Service Quality*, 9(6), 403–410.
10. For a discussion on the dilemma facing cabin crew see Diane L. Damos, Kimberly S. Boyett, and Patt Gibbs (2013), Safety versus Passenger Service: The Flight Attendants' Dilemma, *International Journal of Aviation Psychology*, 23(2), 91–112.
11. Jan Carlzon (1987), *Moments of Truth*, Cambridge, MA: Ballinger Publishing, p. 26.
12. Management guru Tom Peters wrote the introduction to *Moments of Truth* (this quotation is from p. ix). Tom Peters and Robert Waterman were co-authors of *In Search of Excellence* (Warner Books, 1984). At the time of writing this classic management book, both authors worked at the consultancy group McKinsey & Company, New York.
13. Introduction to *Moments of Truth*, by Tom Peters (p. x).
14. See discussions in Sandra Hayes and Brian H. Kleiner (2001), The Managed Heart: The Commercialisation of Human Feeling—and Its Dangers, *Management Research News*, 24, 3–4.
15. See, for example, Lawrence F. Cunningham, Clifford E. Young, and Moonkyu Lee (2004), Perceptions of Airline Service Quality: Pre and Post 9/11, *Public Works Management Policy*, 9(10), 10–25. Also see Garrick Blalock, Vrinda Kadiyali,

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